



MENTAL HEALTH MINUTE

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The Benefits of Outdoor Activities

Planning outdoor activities to improve your mental health may sound simple, but the hustle and bustle of daily life can make it difficult to budget time for nature walks and similar outings. However, finding the time is crucial, as the simple act of stepping outside can have profound mental health benefits.

Outdoor activities contribute to your overall health, which in turn positively impacts your mental well-being. One study found that people who spent at least 120 minutes per week in natural environments reported a significant boost in health and well-being. As such, embracing the outdoors may help:

- **Calm the mind.** Immersion in nature provides a break from technology, allowing your mind to rest and helping you feel more relaxed.
- **Improve cognitive function.** Research by the U.S. Department of Agriculture Forest Service found that spending time in nature can rejuvenate and enhance your cognitive abilities, improving attention and concentration.
- **Combat anxiety and depression.** Studies show

that sunlight can help reduce depression and anxiety symptoms (e.g., low mood and fatigue). Exposure to nature also boosts serotonin, a neurotransmitter that can positively impact your mood.

- **Promote restful sleep.** Outdoor activities often involve physical exercise, which can lead to better sleep. Good sleep is essential for maintaining mental health and managing mental illnesses.
- **Boost self-esteem.** Physical activity and time spent outdoors can positively influence self-esteem. A report from the University of Essex found that just five minutes of “green exercise” (activities done in natural settings) can improve your mood and self-esteem.

Incorporating more outdoor time into daily life may seem challenging, but you can do it with some mindful planning. For example, begin with short outings. Start by regularly taking 10-minute walks and gradually increasing duration and frequency. By taking small steps and partaking in activities that work for your lifestyle, you may kickstart a habit that can greatly improve your mental well-being.

Good Stress vs. Bad Stress

Not all stress is bad. Eustress, or “good stress,” can be beneficial and invigorating. It’s the kind of stress that pushes you to perform better, encourages growth, and helps you achieve your goals or overcome challenges. On the other hand, distress or “bad stress” can negatively impact your health and well-being, often leading to anxiety, depression and physical health issues. Distress is typically what people are referring to when they’re feeling stressed.

Stress is common and healthy; it’s your body’s way of responding to threats, challenges and demands. Understanding the difference between good and bad stress is crucial for maintaining a balanced and productive life. Here are some ways to differentiate between distress and eustress:

- **Emotional response—** Eustress typically feels exciting and motivating, whereas distress feels overwhelming and anxiety-inducing.
- **Physical symptoms—** Eustress may lead to positive physical responses like increased energy.

Distress can cause symptoms such as headaches, fatigue and muscle tension.

- **Impact on performance—** Eustress enhances performance and productivity, while distress can hinder your ability to function effectively.

Finding the Sweet Spot of Stress

Finding the sweet spot of stress involves embracing eustress while managing distress. Here are some tips to help you harness the power of good stress and stay motivated:

- Break down large tasks into smaller, manageable steps.
- Take on challenging work projects that help you learn new skills or something that plays to your strengths.
- Focus on the potential benefits and growth opportunities that come with challenges.

The goal is to reach outside your comfort zone so you’re challenged but not to the point of being overwhelmed.

For further guidance, contact a mental health professional.